

Kevin Featherly, *Dolan Media Newswires*

St. Paul, Minn. - A delegation of Twin Cities-area officials who met with congressional leaders to talk up the I-94 Gateway Corridor are voicing optimism about the project's prospects.

"I think we are picking up steam," said Rafael Ortega, a Ramsey County commissioner who's also a member of the Gateway Corridor Commission.

Ortega said he thinks the meetings may have helped lay the groundwork for speeding the development of transit options along the Gateway Corridor, which stretches east from St. Paul into Wisconsin.

"We'll look at the analysis, we'll look at the hard numbers and we'll let it be data-driven," Ortega said. "But I think we can move this much quicker than the Central Corridor (light rail transit project). I would like to see it moving in the next five years, (to) where we are next in the queue."

The Gateway Corridor project is an undefined plan to improve transit options along the Interstate 94 corridor. Possibilities include instituting bus rapid transit, light-rail or commuter rail along the route, possibly stretching as far east as Eau Claire, Wis.

The project is still in its incubation stage, with a study analyzing options barely under way.

At the end of September, three members of the Gateway Corridor Commission - a group of regional elected officials and business representatives - met with members of Congress and a federal official in Washington.

Commission members making the trip included Ortega; Gary Kriesel, vice chairman of the Washington County Board of Commissioners; and Lake Elmo Mayor Dean Johnston.

They met with five Minnesota congressional members - Democrats Sen. Amy Klobuchar, Sen. Al Franken, Rep. Betty McCollum and Rep. Keith Ellison and Republican Rep. Michele Bachmann - and Democratic U.S. Rep. Ron Kind of Wisconsin.

The Gateway Corridor group also met with Democratic U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar's chief of staff, and with Therese McMillan, deputy administrator of the Federal Transit Administration.

The immediate business of the trip was to push for a \$12 million request, submitted earlier this year, to help pay for environmental, design and engineering, and right-of-way acquisition work along the corridor.

"We've got the dollars for the alternative analysis that is under way now," Ortega said. "But once that is completed, we don't want to have a gap time. So what we are saying (with the \$12 million request) is that we need to be in the new transportation bill as an authorized corridor."

The options analysis should be completed next year, Kreisel said.

He characterized the meetings in D.C. as successful. For example, Kreisel said, McCollum has long been a champion of new mass-transit along I-94, but the talks provided evidence that there's bipartisan support for transit among congressional members whose districts touch the route.

Officials in Washington were impressed that multiple states, counties and cities are involved in the Gateway Commission, and are approaching them with their requests for money as a united front, Ortega said.

"Ten or 12 years ago we used to go there individually and compete," he said. "Now we are going together."